

What's it like when a casino comes to town?

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What impact have casinos had on communities that welcomed them? The Hamilton Spectator conducted interviews with political, business, and health officials from six cities — five in Ontario and one in New York State

OLG Casino Brantford

40 Icomm Drive, Brantford, Ont.; more than 500 slot machines; 55 table games; open 24/7; has Getaway Express snack bar and Getaway Restaurant; betting limits: table games, minimum \$5 to maximum of \$100. Slot machines from 1¢ to \$5. (source: www.olg.ca)

Chris Friel

Mayor of Brantford

"It turned out to be very positive for the community as a whole ... (but) if you create unrealistic expectations for a casino it will falter. It is not, and will not be, the cash cow everyone expects it to be. You hear people draw you a picture of Vegas style this and that, that it will completely change the downtown. The reality is it probably won't. But the way we have invested our share of the money, yes, it did ... The social impact is not even measurable in our social service department. We don't see a great deal from it. If you are worried about the relationship between the poor and addictive gambling you should be more concerned about addiction that leans more toward lottery tickets at variety stores."

Dr. Malcolm Lock

Medical officer of health,

Brantford and Brant County

"We have the usual concerns that we have with problem gambling, particularly with adults and the impacts on youth. — the 19 to 24 age group is the one that is most likely to engage in harmful drinking, and there's a high rate of alcohol-related fatalities, which if served in a gambling environment, encourages things to move along in that direction. ... Brantford has a large number of youth spending time in the core; that younger age group is what I'm most concerned about from public health perspective but it applies to general population as well. If you have people gambling who exceed their financial limits, and that is mixed with alcohol consumption, that further impairs their ability to make rational decisions. If you could have some type of safeguards that would include limited hours of operation for the casino ... and some method of tracking how much people are spending ... and also perhaps even maximize gambling allotments on certain tables and machines, that would be something desirable ... But you recognize that (gambling) will continue, at least if the casino is legal, and it is done overtly, you have some way of controlling it rather than forcing it underground."

Gerry Rudnick

Brantford-Brant Chamber of Commerce

"You could make points (against it) with respect to the social costs but from an economic standpoint, it has been very beneficial for the community. And it's like night and day downtown from what it used to be 15 to 20 years ago ... Turning around a downtown requires money and the casino has provided some of those funds ... The casino is a good community citizen, too."

Casino Rama

5899 Rama Road (just outside Orillia); 192,000 square feet; 2,500 slot machines; 110 table games; 5,000 seat entertainment centre; 300-room hotel; 10 restaurants; open 24/7; Ontario's only First Nations commercial casino; largest single site employer of aboriginal people in Canada with more than 450 aboriginal employees (source: www.olg.ca)

Angelo Orsi

Mayor of Orillia

"The casino is a major employer, and many of them live here, buy homes, pay taxes, shop locally, and that contributes to the overall economy here. And Rama supports local business, partners with them on certain things some of our local food is supplied to Rama, a local bakery does their baked goods... Over the years Rama has given more than \$8 million back to our local community, charitable donations that go toward the wellness fund that goes back into the area ... The negatives are that some in our community tend to try their luck more than they should because of its proximity. And while it brings some people to the area, many of them just go to the casino; it's a day trip from Toronto, which is good and bad, you want to retain your tourists, but the bus trips come, the people gamble, and leave."



Opening a casino in your town is not as big of a gamble as some people think, say mayors who have one in their town already.



Chris Friel, mayor of Brantford, with their casino in the background.

Susan Lang

President of Orillia Chamber of Commerce

"(Rama) is on a native reserve ... the city does not receive any payment. (But) when they built their (5,000 seat) entertainment centre, it was a stronger spinoff to the tourism sector (in Orillia) because there were more people coming not just to gamble, but for entertainment as well, so that was good. The casino itself is a strong participant in community events. Don't know if there is much business spinoff, though. The casino does create 2,500 jobs, so that's important, too ... that has positive impact on this municipality as well, as far as spending patterns ... There is tremendous economic benefit on the reserve; they have built schools and libraries and a fire hall."

Dr. Charles Gardner

Medical officer of health,

Simcoe-Muskoka District Health Unit

From a letter written to area politicians: "Municipal councils need to carefully consider the significant potential public health impacts demonstrated by research to be associated with establishing a local casino ... negative health and social wellbeing impacts resulting from what has variously been called gambling addiction, compulsive gambling, pathological gambling or problem gambling... Problem gambling is associated with concurrent substance misuse (alcohol and other drugs), mental illness (anxiety disorders and depression), health conditions (hypertension, gastric disorders), and suicide (with Las Vegas having the highest suicide rate in the United States for many years). The associated social harms (which also have negative health effects) include bankruptcy, family disruption, and possible involvement in crime. The proportion of the population with problem gambling has been found by research to increase with the availability of gambling facilities."

Caesars Windsor Hotel

and Casino

377 Riverside Drive East, Windsor, Ont.; opened in 1993 and rebranded Caesars Windsor in 2008; two hotel towers featuring 758 rooms; 5,000-seat Colosseum, 10,000-square-foot natural atrium fitness centre; Neros Steakhouse; gaming tables, slots, sports betting, world-class poker room, beverages on demand while you play. (Source: www.caesarswindsor.com)

Eddie Francis

Mayor of Windsor

"Selfishly, knowing this (casino) discussion is going on in Hamilton, I should discourage you guys from getting one, but truthfully, the benefits are well understood by the community. The casino employs 3,000 part- and full-time employees; it is a job creator. Moreover, the payroll benefits — \$125 million a year it injects into payroll and benefits in this community. Those cheques are buying homes, services, supporting other opportunities in other businesses in the community ... It expanded in 2006 and brought in a brand new convention centre, one of largest in Ontario, and 5,000 seat entertainment centre, which is larger than the Caesars in Las Vegas... It is run by the same people who run the Caesars in Vegas; it has a great CEO, executive team. They know what they're doing....There is always the argument about having more spinoffs, but we have seen them. Americans come here, visit the casino, that's a spinoff. The positives have outweighed the cons ... Anyone who says there are no social costs would be denying the fact it does exist. But there are programs in place that have addressed those issues and tried to mitigate them.

Matt Marchand

Windsor-Essex Regional

Chamber of Commerce president

"It has been very positive for Windsor-Essex and the province of Ontario in terms of jobs, economic development ... The casino has been an outstanding corporate citizen as well. Because it's the Caesars brand it allows us obviously to bring in first-rate performers and shows. Over four million visitors came to our region last year, a vast majority of them visited our casino."

OLG Casino Sault Ste. Marie

30 Bay Street West, Sault Ste. Marie; slots open Monday-Wednesday, 9 a.m.-4 p.m./ Thursday-Sunday 24 hours, tables open Sunday-Thursday 10 p.m.-2 a.m./Friday-Saturday 10 a.m.-4 a.m.; 430 slot machines; table games; Getaway Restaurant. (Source: www.olg.ca)

Debbie Amaroso

Mayor of Sault Ste. Marie

"The casino is a valuable corporate partner in this community and a large employer. Absolutely we want to ensure we have them here for a very long time. We have used slot revenue to build a new hospital those funds have made significant differences in our health care. ... One of the concerns I know in other communities is the perceived criminal elements that go along with a casino, but that has not happened. The police respond to no more calls there than they would at any establishment that serves alcohol ... Corporately the casino hosts a lot of community events ... Our business community is very supportive of the casino. We are a border city, and visitors come here to use the casino, stay in hotels overnight, and we see that as a big plus ... The morality of (a casino), the responsibility of it, those kinds of things weigh on people's minds ... But if (gambling) is their choice of entertainment, far be it for me to pass judgment on that. Only draw back is, not everyone games responsibly, and find themselves in dire consequences because of that." It's like anything else, if you're not in control of it, then it controls you. and that's not reserved for just gambling, you see it with alcohol and drugs, anything that can create addictive behaviour.

James Calico

President Sault Ste. Marie Chamber of Commerce

"We have gone through 10 years of economic growth, and it's hard to gauge the impact of the casino on the growth, but there have been positive impacts on jobs, tourism, economic growth. Has been complimentary to our community and as a city amenity... There were comments initially that it would lead to organized crime, prostitution, but we have not seen any of those impacts. Overall, looking back the city doesn't regret the decision ... Obviously there is some kind of drain, regarding people losing disposable income through gambling, but the benefits outweigh the negatives in our community ... We used casino revenue to recruit physicians, we used it to do something positive." A lot of doctors were hired because of that slot revenue, we see a direct correlation, a positive result.

Niagara Fallsview

Casino Resort

6380 Fallsview Boulevard, Niagara Falls, Ont.; over 3,000 slot machines, 130 gaming tables and poker room; 374 room luxury hotel, full service spa and fitness centre, shops and restaurants; 1,500-seat Avalon theatre, more than 30,000 feet of meeting and convention space; built at cost of \$1 billion in 2004. (Source: www.fallsviewcasinoresort.com)

Jim Diodati

Mayor of Niagara Falls (Canada)

"We are a different animal than other communities; we get 12 million tourists a year who come here because of the falls. (Casinos) have a positive and negative side. Casinos are in business to make money; if they invest in your community, they are investing their winnings and your losings. You need to keep that in perspective. Casinos can be a black hole, a lot of operators don't want clients to leave their property, that's why they offer their own buffet of entertainment, food, spa packages, drink, sleep. They don't want you to leave. That's great for the casino, but the question is, how does it integrate into the community? Here, we had them build a small hotel at the casino, only about 300 to 400 rooms ... , and with our mix of hotels in the city, there is no impact. The casino guests have to use surrounding hotels. That's the key, to integrate it so other businesses can benefit so you don't have black hole effect ... Concerns were raised about crime and that did not happen. Police stepped up their presence, which is imperative. When you have gambling and big bucks it brings in a different element. Police needs d step up, and because they did that there has been no increase in crime or negativity....As far as Hamilton (getting a casino) goes, I don't see competition as bad. But the Hamilton model would be very different than Niagara Falls." Tourism is one our top industries."

Carolyn Bones

President Niagara Falls Canada

Chamber of Commerce

"Both (Niagara) casinos have had tremendous economic impact on Niagara Falls; the hotel expansions over the last 15 years have been staggering., expansions of current hotels and new hotels come up. We've send a tremendous surge which can be directly attributable to the casinos being here. We have the 5,000 people casinos employ, which is a significant amount ... Arguably, the number of visitors to Niagara Falls because of a casino is one that has a complicated answer, because of the implications of (U.S. passport restrictions), but still, GTA visitors are still focused on coming to Niagara Falls. That's why we are so opposed to a casino built in the GTA, or anywhere else out that way."

Dr. Valerie Jaeger

Medical officer of health, Niagara Region

"(Casinos) are not all the same. And you look at the population that attends a casino, (it's) not the same in every municipality. In Niagara, it is largely a tourist population. Our Niagara base is 425,000 people, the city 75,000. Niagara Falls has 15 million visitors easily each year. The majority of people attending our casinos are not Niagara residents, so that has a dilution effect on anything happening negatively in the community ... Employment levels are major determinants of health, too, and the casino is a major employer. That's not to say that I approve of the casino, but just that it's a complicated situation. And Niagara needs employment."

Seneca-Niagara Casino

310 Fourth Street, Niagara Falls, N.Y.; more than 2,000 slot machines, high-limit slot area for machines with \$5-\$100 limits; penny spins to \$100 pulls; more than 100 table games; world-class poker room; 604-room hotel, spa and salon; casual/signature/quick dining; 440-seat Bear's Den theatre; 2,400-seat events centre. (Source: www.senecaniagaracasino.com)

(Note: a dispute between the Seneca nation who run the casino and the State of New York has meant that the percentage of annual slot revenues normally paid to the city of Niagara Falls, N.Y. by the Senecas has not happened for three years.)

Paul Dyster

Mayor of Niagara Falls (U.S.A.)

"I'll speak with an asterisk attached: how were things working when they were working. When people were advocating for opening a casino here ... people seized on the idea of tourism being an important part of the solution. A silver bullet mentality; the casino would cure everything, a new era of prosperity. Those expectations were probably overblown ... But in our experience, the direct employment is a significant benefit; a lot of them are relatively lower paying, but also management positions and white collar employment. I don't know anyone feels like getting rich working there, but feel like they could do worse in terms of pay and benefits. The Senecas are pretty good about using local vendors, too. That has been a benefit.

When we were getting paid ... our share of slot revenues was substantial. We were budgeting \$17 million to 18 million US annually from our share of the state's share of slot revenue ... The greatest misfit between what was promised and delivered, was predictions of spinoff benefits. Initially their philosophy seemed to be to hold people inside the casino to spend every last dollar before letting them leave – a black hole to suck people in and not let them go till they spent every nickel in their pockets. Over time, that has changed, they have expressed greater interest in integrating the operation of the casino ... sponsoring street festivals and concerts, and in recent years have also shared bookings with other hotels downtown ... For the last three years we haven't been paid. That's over \$60 million owed the City of Niagara Falls. It's a huge headache and has meant a cash flow crunch for the city. Anecdotally, I know of a significant number of otherwise hard-working sensible people who lost a lot of money whose lives were dramatically changed by becoming addicted to gaming."

John Percy

*President and CEO Niagara Tourism
and Convention Corporation*

"From a tourism business standpoint, the casino was the right move. Others would debate that ... There were other improvements here on the tourism and hospitality sector side: hotels, hotel renovations, a new conference centre was built into a facility that had been boarded up and was turned into a state of the art facility ... That along with continued development in the downtown core is a result of the development of the casino. It did impact our off-season hotel occupancy, we've seen a spike in months when usually we saw low occupancy ... Not all of the development can be attributable to the casino, but it was the start of the turnaround in the direction of Niagara Falls, N.Y. ... and the casino has been a good partner."

Antoinette Lech

*Director of the mental health department
for the County of Niagara (U.S.A.)*

"There have been a number of crisis situations come to our attention, where people have lost in their gambling adventures, and in desperation have attempted to take their own life. We're aware of other cases where people have gone to the casino and neglected children because they leave them in their vehicle for long periods of time unattended. Other cases with high profiles (involve) those who have embezzled from their employers ... in order to fund their gambling habit or cover their losses. We do not seem to have people presenting with gambling itself as the problem, it's the other things that are a result of the gambling."

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